

Master of Annapolis, destroyer of worlds

Propping up slots and defeating Buhl, Miller still has it

by Thomas Dennison

Staff Writer

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ANNAPOLIS — Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. has a lot of strings that he can pull to get what he wants, but this week has given everyone a keen reminder that Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. is the true puppet master in the state capital.

The sledgehammer Miller (D-Dist. 27) of Chesapeake Beach wields as a political boss and the longest-serving Senate president in state history is growing stronger as this year's rough-and-tumble legislative session draws closer to Sine Die.

"No one understands power like Mike Miller," said horseracing industry lobbyist Gerard E. Evans, who was Miller's chief of staff for five years. "He is the quintessential pragmatist, but he also knows how to use his power and he always gets what he wants."

The warm and fuzzy relationship that Miller and Ehrlich shared throughout the first part of the session was shredded Tuesday when Miller-led Senate Democrats voted to reject Lynn Y. Buhl for secretary of the Environment, making the first time that a governor's Cabinet choice has been rejected and making clear that the Senate president can single-handedly derail any component of the new governor's agenda.

This came despite displays of mutual admiration between Miller and the new governor and the fact that they agree on a key element of Ehrlich's budget plan: legalizing slot machines.

Nevertheless, Miller has criticized the governor's staff for its ineptitude on selling the bill, all but dismissing what he calls Ehrlich's "bungled" slots plan and forming a separate subcommittee to begin writing a Senate version.

"Mike Miller is the only reason why slots is still alive today," said W. Minor Carter, a lobbyist for an anti-slots coalition. "He is keeping it on life support. If he goes away, slots is dead, there's no doubt about it."

But if the bill dies or is pushed to referendum, that could enhance the clout of the third key player in Annapolis, House Speaker Michael E. Busch (D-Dist. 30) of Annapolis, who opposes slots.

"Don't count out Mike Busch," Carter said.

On Wednesday, the governor, the speaker and Miller met to discuss ways of closing the state's \$2 billion budget gap, but came to no consensus on slots, tax increases or budget cuts.

What happened with the Buhl nomination illustrates just how clearly Miller sent a message to the governor about who rules the Senate, and perhaps about the fate of legalizing slot machines this year. Ehrlich and his aides spent the weekend trying to line up enough Democratic senators to confirm Buhl, but some senators privately complained of the heavy-handed tactics the governor used, which included threatening projects in their districts. They expected Miller to step in, and step in he did.

As Buhl and her family watched the fiercely partisan debate on the Senate floor Tuesday, key Miller lieutenants switched their votes.

"[Miller] came to me and said 'I would like you to be with me on this,'" said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Thomas McLain Middleton (D-Dist. 28) of Waldorf. "There is no one who can count votes better than Mike Miller, and I knew he needed my vote."

The administration agreed.

Lawrence J. Hogan, Ehrlich's appointments secretary, accused Miller of strong-arming his troops to vote his way, but some of Miller's leadership team — Sens. John C. Astle (D-Dist. 30) of Annapolis and Patrick J. Hogan (D-Dist. 39) of

Montgomery Village, both vice chairmen of standing committees — broke ranks and voted for Buhl.

"We knew there was tremendous pressure being exerted on certain senators," said Paul E. Schurick, an Ehrlich spokesman. Schurick downplayed the battle between Miller and Ehrlich as nothing compared to the past battles Miller has waged.

"This was nothing like Miller vs. Schaefer," said Schurick, who was press secretary for former governor and now Comptroller William Donald Schaefer (D). "[Miller and Ehrlich] are like old chums compared to that."

Middleton, who voted for Buhl's confirmation in the Executive Nominations Committee, became a deciding vote in rejecting the nomination. Middleton said he switched after a Miller-brokered compromise that would have allowed Buhl to serve on an interim basis for a year was rejected by the administration.

Other senators said privately that Ehrlich's involvement in lobbying them further fueled the Democrats' effort to show their strength.

Miller protested that he was not working to shoot down the Buhl nomination, but his fingerprints were all over the process.

He started the ball rolling when he told *The Gazette* more than two weeks before her confirmation hearing that she could be in for a fight, which mobilized environmentalists. Several Senate Democrats said Miller invited Sue Brown, the executive director of the Maryland League of Conservation Voters, to speak to the Democratic caucus a week later and detail Buhl's checkered record at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

Hours before Tuesday's vote, the Democratic caucus met again, discussed Buhl and solidified the votes needed for her rejection.

"I've said this before, but this was not about Lynn Buhl," Middleton said Wednesday evening. "It was about Mike Miller and Bob Ehrlich, and I think the governor learned a valuable lesson of the risks you take when you take on the president of the Senate."

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As Sen. Norman R. Stone Jr. (D-Dist. 6) of Dundalk, a 40-year Assembly veteran who supported Buhl's nomination, put it Tuesday, "If there was ever a doubt of the power and influence of the Senate and the Senate president, it was determined today."